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ABSTRACT

A digest of findings from a national survey by Louis Harris and Associates of adult reading skills comprises this edition of Adult Reading Development, a publication of the National Reading Center. The study measured the ability of adults to respond to practical real-life situations such as reading direct-dial instructions in a telephone directory and reading classified advertisements in newspapers. Results indicate that 4% of the population over 16 suffers serious deficiencies in functional reading ability; another 11% failed on more than 10% of the test items. One percent of the sample was totally illiterate. The young (16 year olds) and the old (over 50) scored significantly lower than other age groups. A positive correlation appeared between income and reading ability; the scores of these with incomes under $5,000 were lower than those with higher incomes. Educational level appears to be the factor most closely related to test scores. Scores were higher in the Midwest and West and lowest in the East; cities and rural areas contain the largest number of people with reading problems. Blacks did more poorly than whites on the test because of lower educational backgrounds. (RS)

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ADULT READING DEVELOPMENT

AN INFORMATION AWARENESS SERVICE

ADULT READING DEVELOPMENT is a new service of the National Reading Center, intended to be helpful to workers, especially those outside the school systems, who are concerned with the reading problems of adults and out-of-school youth.

This second issue is a digest of findings from a national sample survey of adult reading skills at the "survival" level, part of a continuing exploration of the nature, extent and locus of reading problems among the out-of-school population.

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A NATIONWIDE STUDY OF ADULT READING SKILLS

As part of its continuing effort to explore the extent of adult reading deficiencies in the United States, the National Reading Center in Washington, D.C. commissioned Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., to conduct a nationwide study of *functional* reading ability, that is, reading skills required to cope with everyday experiences in the lives of most American adults. The study measured the ability of those surveyed to respond to practical, real-life situations by asking them to read and answer questions related to the following material:

- Direct long-distance instructions from a telephone directory.

- Classified employment and housing advertisements from newspapers across the nation.

- An application form based on a variety of standard forms commonly required for a wide range of benefits and opportunities (Social Security, unemployment, public assistance, Medicare, unemployment benefits, credit, etc.)

In addition to measuring and analyzing the ability of Americans to read material related to each of these functional areas, the Harris firm drew together all of the items included in the questionnaire into an index which represents a summation of reading difficulty across the nation.

In this brief report, we will digest some of the main findings of the study: the overall estimates of reading handicaps and the profile of groups which seem to suffer most from the problem. More detailed findings will be presented about two sections of the study which seem to have aroused great interest: long-distance dialing instructions and classified housing ads.

A full technical report on the Harris study will soon be available from Educational Resources Information Service (ERIC). Information for ordering will be provided in a subsequent issue.

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First, a word of caution on the complex and as yet unresolved problem of definition and meaningful measurement of adult literacy.

THE MEANING OF LITERACY: A CONTINUING EXPLORATION

The Harris study summarized here provides some precise new insights into the nation's reading problem. However, it addresses itself to only one of the many facets of reading–the ability to respond to practical tasks of daily life. This is only one aspect of a research effort aimed at establishing meaningful new concepts of "literacy" in a modern society hastening into the "post-industrial" stage. And the Harris study is one among a number to approach the problems of defining and measuring reading ability from different vantage points.

Therefore, we should not seek in the Harris study a settled definition of literacy. Neither should we try to read into this study an implied aspiration level for the National Right to Read Effort. In the National Reading Center, we have called the practical daily reading tasks studied by Harris–"survival" literacy. Adults troubled by reading at this minimum level have a dismaying handicap as workers, parents and citizens. The RIGHT to read, however, requires more than these survival skills if we are to give meaning to the goals implied by the late Commissioner of Education, James Allen, when he proclaimed that "by the end of the 1970's no one shall be without the skill and the desire necessary to read to the full limits of his capability."

While the exploration of new meanings of literacy and more precise measuring techniques–both complicated tasks–continues in work being done by the Educational Testing Service, the University of Texas, in the National Assessment of Educational Progress and in other studies, efforts to improve the nation's reading ability at all levels must proceed, for the problem is great. The added facts resulting from the Harris study are grim.

HOW WAS THE STUDY MADE?

The reading test, assembled from such simple sources as classified housing and employment ads, instructions for long-distance dialing and for completing various application forms familiar to us all, was presented to a sample of Americans age 17 and over and to a special over-sample of 16 year olds. As in all national sample surveys, we must recognize that there is a small range in all the data required to cover the possibility of sampling error, and these ranges are greater when sub-groups of the total sample are being analyzed. A number of precautions were taken to ensure that the test was truly measuring reading ability: no one was penalized because he could not write well or because he did not know or could not recall the exact answers to some questions, such as for example, his family income.

ADULT "SURVIVAL" READING SKILLS

Though the Harris data sharpen our perception of the national reading problem, they do not alter it fundamentally or present any startling departures from the general picture we have from previous Census reports and other studies.

Serious Deficiencies

All in all, 4% of the U.S. population 16 years of age and older (approximately 5,649,000 adults) suffer from serious deficiencies in functional reading ability. Their failure on more than 20% of the questionnaire items places in serious doubt their ability to function easily in practical situations where reading ability is essential.

Here are some examples, picked at random, of the kinds of questions the respondents were asked to read. They vary in difficulty, but all are taken directly from everyday reading tasks we all encounter.

> What is the color of your eyes?
>
> How many passenger automobiles are owned by members of your household?
>
> Now look at this classified ad for an apartment. How does the ad describe the halls of the apartment?
>
> How long have you lived at your present address?
>
> What is your current employment status: are you an hourly worker, salaried, self-employed, retired, a housewife, student, unemployed, or what?

Lesser Handicaps

Another 11% (approximately 15,535,000 adults) failed on more than 10% of the items; serious effort would be required of this group to respond to the printed word in real-life situations.

Total Illiteracy

One percent of the sample, representing some 1,412,000 Americans age 16 and over, missed every item. They are totally illiterate.

LOCUS OF ILLITERACY

The Harris analysts note that reading problems are greater in the following groups than in the population as a whole:

The 16-Year Olds and the Over 50

The young (16-year-olds) and the old (50 and over) scored significantly lower than the other age groups. Only 32% of the 16-year-olds and 35% of the 50 and up group finished with perfect (100%) scores, compared with 45% of the 16 to 24 age group and 48% of those 25 to 49. Educational levels are, of course, lower among the older American population; and 16-year-olds may have been at a disadvantage due to lack of experience in some of the test areas, such as long-distance dialing or applying for a driver's license.

Low Income

A high 11% of the under $5,000 income group scored less than 80% on the test, compared with only 2% for the $5,000-$9,999 and the $10,000-$14,999 group and only 1% for those with incomes of $15,000 or over.

The Less Educated

Educational level—rather than income or age—seems to be the factor most closely related to scores in all those tested. Only 25% of those with an 8th grade education or less scored 100%, compared with 34% with some high school education, 46% for high school graduates, and a high 56% for those with some college or a college degree. Furthermore, it is striking that a full 16% of those with an 8th grade or less

education failed on more than 20% of the items, compared with 3% of those with some high school or a high school diploma and less than 0.5% of the college educated.

Geographical Concentrations: The South and East

Only 35% of those in the East scored 100% correct, compared with 42% in the South, and a higher 46% in both the Midwest and the West. A total of 18% of those in the East and 17% of those in the South scored lower than 90% correct, compared with only 11% in the Midwest and 12% in the West.

Rural and Big City Dwellers

Results varied also with the size of the place. In the suburbs, with larger concentrations of high-income and well-educated people, 51% achieved a perfect score, compared with 40% in towns, 42% in cities, and 41% in rural areas. In rural areas, however, a high 18% missed 10% or more of the items. In big cities, large numbers (8%) missed 20% or more. It is safe to say that cities and rural areas contain the largest number of people with real reading problems.

The Less Skilled in the Labor Force

When analyzed by occupation, the results are not surprising. One-half of those interviewed in professional or executive positions finished with 100% correct, while only 2% fell below 80% correct. Among sales and white collar workers, 45% had perfect scores, while 3% fell below 80% correct. Among service workers and skilled labor, 43% scored 100% correct and 4% fell below 80% correct. Among semi-skilled and unskilled labor, however, a full 9% scored under 80% correct, while only 35% had a perfect score.

Black Citizens

Blacks fared far more poorly than whites, with 18% of the black population failing on more than 20% of the index items. Despite this sharp difference in results, the Harris analysts do not feel that race alone is a meaningful indicator of reading ability.

Educational background proved a far more significant variable than race, income or geographic location; and it is striking that 35% of the blacks interviewed had stopped their schooling at the 8th grade or earlier, compared with a much smaller 11% of whites. Similarly, 31% of whites interviewed were college educated, compared with only 14% of blacks. Further statistical analysis showed that differences in reading ability between blacks and whites exist at all levels. Yet this difference tends to become much smaller among the better educated. This finding suggests that an equal number of years of formal schooling does not always mean equal education, particularly at lower levels, and that the quality of education received may be a more meaningful indicator still.

READING INSTRUCTIONS FOR LONG-DISTANCE DIALING

The main body of questions in the Harris study came from a variety of standard forms for driver's license, employment, etc., and from a subset of the personal identification questions in these forms, e.g., place of birth, height, weight and so on.

In two sections of the study, cards were presented with reading material for the respondent. One of these related to instructions for long-distance dailing. Respondents were handed a show card and told, "On this card you will find the direct dialing

instructions that appear in the front of your local telephone directory. Often these instructions are difficult to follow. We'd like you to help us find out whether they should be changed." Following is the show card given the respondents:

AREA CODES FOR SOME CITIES

Place	Area Code
Evansville, Indiana	812
Oakland, California	415
Harrison, New York	914
Williamsport, Pennsylvania	717
Austin, Texas	512

HOW TO DIAL

Listen for dial tone, then dial as follows:

STATION-TO-STATION CALLS

Local call	dial local number
Long distance call	dial '1' + area code + local number

PERSON-TO-PERSON CALLS

Dial "O" [OPERATOR], then continue to dial the number as above. [An Operator will answer to help complete your call.]

CHARGES FOR CALLS (Initial 3 minutes)

STATION-TO-STATION

	Day	Night	Weekend	All Days, All Hours
Boston, Mass.	.70	.55	.40	1.10
Minneapolis, Minn.	.55	.40	.35	.85
Seattle, Wash.	.80	.65	.55	1.25

Respondents were then asked four questions relating to the information on the show card:

"Please look at this card and see if you can tell me the area code for Williamsport, Pennsylvania."

"Please look at the card again and tell me which city you would reach by dialing area code 812."

"If you wanted to place a long-distance, *station-to-station* call to a friend in Austin, Texas, without the help of an operator, what would you dial? You will find the instructions on how to dial on the card."

"Please look at the card one last time and tell me the charges for a three-minute station-to-station call to Seattle, Washington, at night."

Four correct answers were possible for this series. Mr. Harris discussed his findings as follows:

"Let me go through with you some of the actual results. Here we have the telephone dialing series (see tables next page). There were four questions asked, and as you can see, 90% did four out of four correctly. 10% had at least one wrong. If we break this score down by sex, you can see that men, 14%, (as against 10% overall population) had more trouble. Perhaps women are more acclimated to the telephone than men.

"If we go to age, we have the most interesting phenomenon appearing. 13% of the young people 16 years of age failed on the telephone long distance use test, as opposed to 10% of the population.

"The next group that had trouble were the people 50 and over in age. As we can see, 16% missed some items. Of blacks, 21% had trouble using the telephone. The next group with trouble: 20% of the people with incomes of $5,000 or less. Then finally we get to the education column. Of those whose education never got as far as high school, 30% had trouble with the long-distance telephone instructions. In other words, inability to read well was a handicap for more men than women; in the very young and the very old; among blacks; for those with incomes of less than $5,000; and for those whose education never went beyond eighth grade."

SCORES FOR TELEPHONE DIALING SERIES (I)

	Total	Male	Female	16 Years	16-24	25-30	31-49	50 and Over	White	Black	Under $5,000	$5,000-$9,999	$10,000-$14,999	$15,000 and Over	8th Grade	Some H.S.	H.S. Grad.	Some Coll./ Grad.
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
4 of 4	90	86	90	87	92	94	90	84	90	79	80	89	93	92	70	90	91	95
3 of 4	8	10	7	12	7	5	8	10	8	9	10	9	7	8	18	9	7	5
2 of 4	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	3	1	6	5	1	*	-	6	1	1	*

CLASSIFIED HOUSING ADS

Another set of reading material was drawn from typical classified advertisements for houses and apartments which appear in newspapers throughout the country. Unlike the actual ads, however, words in the test ads were spelled out in full, rather than abbreviated, to preclude failure from an inability to recognize unfamiliar symbols and abbreviations that may not be used consistently throughout the country.

To begin with, respondents were told, "With the shortage of housing today in many parts of the country, many people are searching for houses and apartments in the classified ads of their local newspapers. Some people find those ads are confusing and misleading. We'd like to find out how clear they really are."

Respondents were then handed a show card and told, "Let's suppose that you were looking for new housing and you saw this ad in the newspaper." The show card read as follows:

> "Attractive house in excellent condition. Three floors, Full basement. Large living room. Backyard with garden. Two-car garage."

Three questions related to this housing ad:

> "Would you tell me how the ad describes the living room of the house?"
>
> "How does the ad describe the backyard?"
>
> "How does the ad describe the basement?"

Those interviewed were next shown a second housing ad:

> "Three-room apartment, brick fireplace, tile bath, carpeted halls. Safe, locked building. Immediate occupancy."

Three questions were based on this ad:

> "How does the ad describe the fireplace?"
>
> "How does the ad describe the halls of the apartment?"
>
> "When will this apartment be available for occupancy?"

A similar set of three questions related to another housing ad. Altogether there were nine questions in this housing ad series and the following tabulations show how many correct answers (9 out of 9; 8 out of 9; etc.) were found in the various groups:

A score pattern emerges in this series similar to the one in most parts of test. Lower scores occurred in the following groups: 50 and over in age; blacks; under $5,000 income; 8th grade or less education; in the cities, and among those in semi- or unskilled occupations.

SCORES ON CLASSIFIED HOUSING ADS (II)

	Total	Male	Female	16 Years	16-24	25-30	31-49	50 and Over	White	Black	Under $5,000	$5,000 to $9,999	$10,000 to $14,999	$15,000 and Over	8th Grade	Some H.S.	H.S. Grad.	Some Coll./ Grad.
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
9 of 9	88	88	91	92	90	91	89	87	93	67	81	92	92	92	71	91	90	93
8 of 9	7	8	5	5	7	4	8	6	6	15	9	7	6	5	13	6	5	6
7 of 9	2	2	2	1	1	4	1	3	1	6	3	1	1	1	4	2	2	1
6 of 9	1	1	1	1	1	–	1	*	*	2	1	*	1	1	1	1	1	*
5 of 9	1	*	1	1	1	–	1	1	*	2	1	*	–	1	2	*	1	–
4 of 9	*	*	*	–	*	*	–	1	*	1	1	*	–	–	2	–	*	*

*Less than 0.5%.

SCORES ON CLASSIFIED HOUSING ADS (II)

	Total	East	South	Midwest	West	Cities	Suburbs	Towns	Rural	Professional/ Executive	Sales/ White Collar	Skilled Labor, Service	Semi-/ Unskilled Labor	Born in U.S.A.	Born Outside U.S.A.
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
9 of 9	88	89	88	88	93	86	93	91	90	93	87	93	82	90	88
8 of 9	7	6	6	8	6	8	5	6	7	5	7	4	10	6	8
7 of 9	2	2	2	3	1	2	1	2	2	2	3	2	2	2	1
6 of 9	1	1	1	1	*	1	1	1	*	*	1	1	1	1	–
5 of 9	1	1	*	*	*	1	–	*	*	*	–	*	1	*	1
4 of 9	*	–	1	*	–	*	–	*	*	*	–	*	*	*	–

*Less than 0.5%.

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